

Stimmen aus Asien

Return to the Imperial System or Pursuing Global Good Governance. Dialogue with Professor Yu Keping on Imperial Studies and Global Order

Fei Haiting. Translated by Thomas Heberer.

Introduction

The debate about empires and their historical role has played a rather subordinate role in western academic discussion in recent decades. The world assumed that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the history of empires had come to an end. Francis Fukuyama accordingly proclaimed the “end of history.” Although some books on this topic were published in the 2000s, such as Herfried Münkler’s book “Empires: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the US” (2007), which primarily deals with the rise and fall of empires in the past and present and has also been translated into Chinese; “Empires of World History” by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper (2011), or a book publication of the same name by Niv Horesh (2021); their titles already indicate that these are primarily studies with a strong historical focus.

Yu Keping has now published the first comprehensive Chinese book on the subject and theory of empires, making a contribution not only to the definition, delimitation, and clarification of the concept but also to the field itself. He himself refers to it as “the first book on the political philosophy of empires by a Chinese author.” His starting point is the resurgence of empires against the backdrop of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Russia, for him, is a prime example of this resurgence, which has had enduring negative consequences for global order and the further progress of globalization. The question of whether the United States and China are also forming empires remains open. Yu’s critical stance is an expression of the fact that the Russian aggression against Ukraine is being highly controversially debated within China’s intellectual community as well as among Chinese citizens.

Yu Keping is Chair Professor and Director of the Research Center for Chinese Politics at Peking University (PKU). Concurrently, he is Dean of the School of Government at Shenzhen University. He is a leading scholar and advocator of democratic governance in China and an internationally renowned public intellectual. His major fields include political philosophy, comparative politics, globalization,

civil society, governance and politics in China. Among his many books are “Chinese Perspectives on Global Governance and China” (ed., Leiden: Brill, 2021), “Power and Authority” (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2020), “Towards Good Governance” (Beijing, 2016), “Politics in Transitional China (Hong Kong, 2016), Essays on Modernizing State Governance” (Beijing, 2015), “Globalization and Changes in China’s Governance” (Brill, 2013), “Governance and Rule of Law in China” (ed., Brill, 2012) and “Democracy Is A Good Thing” (Brookings, 2010). He has been awarded numerous honorary professorships and honorary doctorates at top universities. He was also selected as one of the “30 most influential figures since the initiating of reforms in China” in 2008 and was ranked as one of the “100 Global Top Thinkers” by the US journal *Foreign Policy* in 2011. In 2015 he was selected by the journal *China Newsweek* as one of the “Most Influential Scholars of 2015.” In the June 2015 issue of *The China Quarterly* a special article was published on “Yu Keping and the Chinese Intellectual Discourse on Good Governance.”

Imperial Studies and State Theory

Fei Haiting: The recent articles you published on the rise and fall of empires have aroused strong reactions from the academic community. People are particularly concerned about the return of empire studies in political science in recent years, as well as the global order after the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As you are not only engaged in the study of empires but also an active advocate of global governance, we are particularly interested in hearing your views on these issues. You have argued that the outcome of the Second World War brought about the end of empires and people turned to the study of nation-states. And with the advent of the era of globalization and the disintegration of the socialist camp in Soviet Eastern Europe, the process of globalization once again challenged the imagination of the nation-state. Theoretically, the role and function of the state should continue to weaken, giving way to good global governance, so why has the question of empires returned to the forefront of the theories of the state in recent years?

Yu Keping: Empire studies have not only become a topic of concern for theories of the state, but have in fact become a hot issue of common concern for studies in history, political science and international relations. The Second World War was a watershed for empire studies. Before the Second World War, empire studies and state studies were intertwined and inextricably linked. The outcome of this war profoundly changed the course of human history. It not only enabled the peaceful forces of humankind to finally overcome the aggressive forces of fascist militarism and change the centuries-old European-centered political landscape of the world; but also triggered the upsurge of national liberation movements. Accordingly, the vast majority of Asian, African and Latin American countries liberated themselves from their colonial suzerainties and became independent nation-states. Thus the imperialist colonial system, which had dominated human history for centuries, was

completely destroyed, and sovereign and independent nation-states became the protagonists on the world political stage. Thus, after the Second World War, studies on the theory of the state focused no longer on empires, but on nation-states or sovereign states.

At the end of the twentieth century, with the advent of the era of globalization and the disintegration of the socialist camp in Soviet Eastern Europe, the course of human history once again took a major turn and the world political landscape was readjusted. The bipolar era of world politics, represented by the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—came to an end and human politics entered the era of multipolarity. In particular, the process of globalization has profoundly affected the traditional sovereign state system and has fundamentally challenged people's imagination of nation-states. In line with this shift in the historical process of human politics, the focus of state theory has once again shifted. One notable change is that more political scientists have begun to focus on the profound effects of globalization on state sovereignty and the nation-state. Another change, somewhat surprising to many political scientists, is the renewed attention paid to the problem of empire. Although the reasons for this renewed attention by political scientists in various countries since the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century vary, the renewed enthusiasm for empire is no longer just mere academic interest among scholars of history, humanities, and social science, specifically since globalization fundamentally challenges the nation-state identity of human beings.

The tremendous impact of globalization on national sovereignty and nation-state identity has prompted people to think about a new international order in the era of globalization. On the one hand, globalization is fundamentally shaking the nation-state system based on national sovereignty; on the other hand, globalization has not spawned a new world order. Moreover, although the globalization era has put an end to the worldwide confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, which was dominated by the US-Soviet Cold War, it has not put an end to conflicts and wars worldwide. The old conflicts and threats of war have disappeared, but new conflicts between major powers and regions have arisen, and humanity is still under the threat of war. Since globalization has fundamentally shaken the nation-state system that mankind harnessed to replace the imperial system, the question is what structural arrangement will be used to maintain the basic global order in future? In reasoning about this question, some people attempt to turn back to an imperial system in the name of “peace under empire.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the socialist camp led by the Soviet Union also withdrew from the stage of history. The Cold War between the two superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union came to an end, leaving the United States as the sole superpower. The US is the world's largest and most powerful economy, and also the world's financial center. It ranks first in the world in terms of technological development and its education system. In addition, the US is the world's only military superpower, with the highest defense spending, the

largest number of overseas military bases, and the most sophisticated weaponry. It plays an irreplaceable role in the global order, thus inspiring a new “imperial imagination.” Although the rapid rise of China since the beginning of the twenty-first century poses a great challenge to US hegemony, so far the US is still the only country with the power to act as the “world’s policeman.” Given the historical memories of “peace under Athens,” “peace under Rome,” and “peace under Britain,” many scholars consciously or unconsciously regard the United States as the new empire in the era of globalization. In addition to the United States, Russia under Putin’s rule is still considered by many as pursuing the “imperial dream” of the Tsarist era due to its strong influence on the “Commonwealth of Independent States,” especially its military actions against Georgia, Ukraine and other countries.

The deep reflection on history in the era of globalization also calls for the return of imperial studies. The civilization of empires once occupied a central position in the world’s major civilization systems and the system of empires was also the political structure in which human beings lived for a long time. The rise and fall of empires in the past still serves as a warning for the rise and fall of great powers today. No matter what kind of era humanity is in, if we want to minimize the cost of progress and avoid repeating the mistakes of history, we constantly have to reflect on historical experiences. For humanity, whenever historical reflection is undertaken, it cannot be separated from reflecting on the experiences and lessons of those empires that have risen and fallen throughout history.

Finally, the return of imperial studies is also closely related to left-wing scholars’ critique of imperialism and their reflections on postcolonialism. Western left-wing and radical scholars, including Western Marxists, have always been highly vigilant against imperialism and have waged an uncompromising struggle against the new hegemony represented by the United States. The analysis and criticism of imperialism by many left-wing scholars are not only directed at the political hegemony and economic aggression of the Western powers led by the United States, but also attempt to profoundly expose the cultural flux left behind by imperialism in the colonized countries and to awaken the sense of autonomy of those colonized countries. As a result, numerous left-wing scholars have become the vanguard of a new round of imperial and imperialist studies.

Fei Haiting: I notice that your research pays special attention to the identification of some core concepts and the study of empire is no exception. In your opinion, how should we understand the connection and difference between empire and similar concepts such as state, nation-state, great power, strong state, and hegemony from the perspective of political science?

Yu Keping: Empire studies have become a hot topic in humanities and social sciences in the 21st century. However, there are still shortcomings in the academic research. The existing empire studies are mainly historiographical, focusing on the examination and exposition of famous empires in history, but lacking general theoretical analysis, resulting in a number of serious deviations in empire studies.

For example, the concept of empire is ambiguous and many authors are not aware of the difference and connection between empire and the concepts of state, nation, great state, and hegemony. They also lack a profound understanding of the universal law and historical fate of the rise and fall of empires.

In my forthcoming book “A New Theory of Empire,” I will focus on a general theoretical analysis of empires, especially on defining the concept of empire from the perspective of political science, identifying similarities and differences between empire and similar concepts already mentioned, summarizing the universal laws of the rise and fall of empires. Today, even the most powerful countries will be abandoned by world history and human civilization if they still try to pursue their dreams of empire by relying on their military and economic strength. My new book delves into the concept and features of empire, also in order to correct a harmful bias in social sciences: increasing emphasis on data and case studies is accompanied by a serious neglect of theoretical abstraction of the social phenomena under study. Accordingly, I pay special attention to conceptual analysis, trying to clarify the connection and distinction between empire on the one hand and nation, state, kingdom, great power, statehood, federation, hegemony, colony, colonialism, and imperialism on the other. Let me spell out the most important terms:

Empire and state. A state is a political community based on territory, sovereignty, and nationality, with clear territorial boundaries and at least formal political equality among the various peoples and regions within. It is the earliest form of public authority of mankind and is generally considered to have evolved on the basis of tribal alliances, initially in the form of city-states. States preceded empires and from the available archaeological evidence, the first states and the first empires in human history are separated by nearly a thousand years. A common logic of political occurrence, as seen in political history around the world, is that the emergence of states inevitably leads to the emergence of empires. When some countries are strong enough, they inevitably conquer and annex other countries around them, thus forming a system of empires composed of suzerain states and vassal states. In other words, an empire is an ensemble of several states, a crucial prerequisite for its existence. The territorial boundaries of states are generally very clear, but the territorial boundaries of empires are often ambiguous. States are usually legally and formally equal to each other, while regions and nations within empires are formally unequal, especially regarding the interrelationship between the suzerain state and vassal states.

Empire and nation. A nation is based on shared commonalities such as language, culture, blood relations, and territory. It can be described as a cultural and blood community. The German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte particularly emphasized the essential significance of language for a nation, arguing that as long as a specific language exists, there exists also a distinct nation. An empire, in contrast, is a political community based on territory and sovereignty, which is both inseparable and distinct from a nation as a community of blood and culture. A single

nation can form a state and a single state can comprise multiple ethnicities. When a single ethnic group inhabits a common territory, it usually forms a state. As peoples and nations evolve, a single nation may also contain multiple peoples. Empires, on the other hand, are necessarily made up of multiple ethnicities, where asymmetrical relationships among these ethnicities exist. Whereas nations often share a common language and culture, empires are multicultural communities with different cultures and languages.

Empires and nation-states. A nation-state is a modern form of state dominated by one or more ethnicities and is a hybrid of nation and state. It merges cultural and political identities into one, making the political frontier fit the cultural map. The distinction between empire on the one hand and state and nation on the other also applies to a large extent to the distinctions between empire and nation-state. These distinctions focus on the history of its formation, the nature of the state, the structure of power, territorial boundaries, and membership relations. In addition to the fact that empires are much older than nation-states, the German historian Jürgen Osterhammel makes eight distinctions between nation-states and empires. First, nation-states have clear borders with neighboring states, while empires usually have blurred borders with those states; second, nation-states emphasize their own homogeneity and indivisibility, while empires tolerate heterogeneity and differences to a considerable extent; third, nation-states derive their legitimacy of power from the people at the lower level, while empires derive their legitimacy of power from tributes from above; fourth, citizens in nation-states are formally equal; fifth, cultural features such as religion, language, and customs are shared by all people in a nation-state, while a shared culture in empires is limited to a few aristocratic elites; sixth, the popularization of civilization is the responsibility of the state and the right of citizens in nation-states, while in empires it is embodied in the mission of aristocratic elites; seventh, nation-states trace their origins to ancestral tribes, while empires trace their origins to rulers of the empire; eighth, nation-states have an emotional affiliation to a specific territory, while empires are more concerned with territorial expansion.

Empires and great states. “Great state” is a popular concept in international politics referring to states with larger populations and territories. Great states are not necessarily powerful countries, but they often occupy an important position in the international system due to both their huge populations and their economic size. In a general sense, there exists an interconnectedness between empires and great states. Empires are based on the conquest and occupation of other countries by powerful states, the territorial expansion and military conquest of suzerain states. Therefore, regarding territorial size and national power, empires are usually great states. However, a large state in terms of territorial size and national power is not necessarily an empire. A great state is transformed into an empire only when it engages in foreign expansion, conquering and occupying the territories of other states. As long as it does not expand externally and does not occupy and rule the territories or dependencies of other countries, a great state is at best a regional

hegemonic state, not an empire. However, in his book “Great States,” Timothy Brook, a Canadian expert on Chinese history, makes an illuminating point: He argues that *great states* in the East Asian context, such as the “Great Song,” “Great Yuan,” “Great Ming,” “Great Qing,” etc., is a specific political form differing from *empires* in the European context.

Empire and hegemony. The concept of hegemony in international relations emphasizes the political, economic, and military control, and the dominance of a powerful state or a great power over other states. It originated in ancient Greece and generally refers to the Athenian League formed by Athens in the fifth century AD to counteract the Persian Empire. In this league Athens was in the position of a hegemon and had overwhelming dominance over the other member states of the league. Accordingly, in the field of international relations the two concepts of hegemony and empire intersect and overlap. The process of empire building is usually a process by which a suzerain state, by virtue of its great military and economic power, exercises control and domination over other countries and regions. In other words, empire and hegemony are closely related, and the suzerain state figures as hegemon. But, although the vast majority of empires are de facto hegemonic, empires are not equal to hegemonic powers and there are several important differences between the two. First, a hegemonic state is not necessarily an empire. If a powerful state seeks only control and dominant influence over other states, but does not annex other states and regions, then such a hegemonic state is not an empire in the strictest sense of the word. Second, a hegemonic state is at least formally equal to other states, i.e. it recognizes the equality of states in the formal domestic and international legal system, whereas an empire does not recognize the equality of suzerain states and dependent states even formally. It is one of the important features of empires that the various political and economic privileges of the suzerain state over the vassal states are regulated by a formal legal system.

Empires and the Imperial System

Fei Haiting: You mentioned that, on the one hand, globalization is fundamentally shaking the nation-state system based on national sovereignty; on the other hand, it has not brought about the desired new world order. Therefore, many people recall the “peace under empire” concept. From the perspective of political science, what was the world order like in the era of empires?

Yu Keping: Historically, when strong empires existed, the international order was usually more stable and even brought more lasting peace, the most prominent one being the “peace under Rome.” The structural basis of this imperial peace is the hierarchical power order within the empire.

An empire is a system composed of different vassal states, in which no state other than the suzerain state has supreme power. Even in imperial systems with a high degree of autonomy, the supremacy that is symbolic for external purposes belongs to the suzerain state. For example, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a large system

of states that, in addition to the two major powers of Austria and Hungary, included smaller entities such as Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia. The laws of the Empire stipulated that Austria and Hungary were two equal and independent states, and Austria-Hungary enjoyed autonomy in the areas of legislation, administration, justice, taxation, customs, and coinage, respectively, but foreign affairs and defense were the responsibility of the central government of the Empire. In this sense, the empire was also an interstate or interregional power relationship in which there was only one supreme sovereignty, to which all other powers were subordinate.

An empire is usually a relatively independent system in the international order. Since it consists of a number of previously independent states and nations, each with its own historical and cultural traditions and political and legal systems, the suzerain state not only maintains to a considerable extent the original linguistic and cultural traditions of the vassal states, but also allows the retention of the original political and legal systems to a certain extent. The empire attempts to preserve order and stability among its internal dependencies through its own laws and institutions. Thus empires became, in effect, a specific international system of their own. Many famous empires in history, such as the Persian Empire, the Macedonian Empire, the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire or the British Empire had many dependencies and colonies, and their territories were so vast that they even crossed the borders of Europe, Asia, and Africa, making them international systems. The British Empire in its heyday, for example, encompassed so many countries and covered such a vast area that it could have become an international system of its own across continents.

Fei Haitong: Is it possible for two or more imperial systems to exist in the international community at the same time?

Yu Keping: The situation you describe exists in the context of world history and I call it the “imperial hegemony” struggle. Hegemony means the conquest and domination of other countries. Usually it is difficult for more than two hegemonic states to coexist within a region. An ancient Chinese proverb states that “one mountain can’t have two tigers.” In international politics we speak of the so-called “Thucydides trap.” In his famous book “History of the Peloponnesian War,” Thucydides summarized the causes of the war between Athens and Sparta as follows: the rise of Athens as an emerging power aroused the fear of Sparta which eventually led to the Peloponnesian War. This view of Thucydides was later summarized by international political scientists as the “Thucydides trap.” For example, Graham Allison, an American scholar, cited Thucydides’ assertion that the root cause of the conflict between Athens and Sparta was the “rise” of Athens and the “fear” of Sparta. Following this logic, he also analyzed 16 similar cases of war and competition between nations in the previous 500 years, and tried to use the Thucydides trap concept to analyze the current competition between China and the United States. The Thucydides trap is actually a geopolitically induced problem of

imperial hegemony. If one imperial hegemon already exists in a region, the rise of another one in the same region usually leads to war between them.

Fei Haiting: In analyzing the factors that determine the rise and fall of empires, you also specifically address the underlying dynamics of empire creation. In your opinion, what is the political logic and the underlying motivation for the emergence of empires?

Yu Keping: From the available archaeological and documentary materials, the time gap between the first state and the first empire in human history was less than 1,000 years. In terms of spatial distribution, empires first appeared in Mesopotamia, followed by regions in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Every region of human civilization in the world has, sooner or later, given rise to a system of empires. The powerful and influential empires in world history, such as the empires of Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, the Roman Empire, the Great Han Empire, the Spanish Empire, the Portuguese and the Ottoman ones, the Russian Empire, the German, French, and British Empires, etc., were distributed in all world continents. It is not difficult to find that wherever states exist, sooner or later empires develop. This spatial and temporal relationship between states and empires shows that there is an inherent political logic between them. The logic can be simply depicted as follows: when a state grows and becomes strong enough, it will inevitably expand and conquer neighboring countries, thus forming a specific regional hierarchical order and this hierarchical order system among states is the empire system. When a country develops into an empire, its comprehensive power is greatly enhanced, making it a regional or even a global hegemon. In short, when a state develops to a certain level, empires inevitably emerge; when empires are created, some states become hegemons over others and emperors of empires become “kings of kings.”

The fundamental motive of empires is to seize the material resources of other nations and peoples. Violent plundering was the most convenient and most common means of acquiring wealth in traditional societies. Ancient empires made little secret of the fact that the purpose of foreign military conquest and expansion was to occupy more land and seize more wealth. More land, more food, more slaves, more concubines, more gold and silver, bigger palaces and cities, and more luxurious living were almost crucial objectives for ancient empires and rulers did not hide these motivations for imperial expansion. For modern empires, even though there is an additional layer of shame on the surface, the fundamental purpose is still the plundering and seizure of material resources.

The acquisition of resources such as land, capital, labor, markets, and wealth was always a primary motivation for developing into empires. Empires always tried to justify conquering other countries to win the widespread sympathy and support of public opinion. The vast majority of the explanations used were fabricated to cover up their aggression and the rulers of the empires themselves knew that no one would really believe these blatant lies. But it is also true that some imperial rulers labeled their aggressive expansions as “righteous acts” or “divine missions” to further “the

progress of civilization.” It was always asserted that the empire was created in order to achieve national and regional “security” and in the interest of “world peace.” From ancient imperial wars of conquest to contemporary imperialist wars, national, regional, and even global “security” and “peace” have been used by dictators to deceive people and to whitewash their aggression externally. However, there are deeper reasons behind why “security” and “peace” have become the “magic weapons” giving birth to empires. First, in the traditional geopolitical era, territorial security was the most important feature of national security. Traditional territorial security relies heavily on the geopolitical relationship between a country and its neighbors. If the neighboring countries are friendly, the country seems to be secure. Conversely, if the neighboring states are hostile, a country's territorial security is under threat. In order to preserve their so-called territorial security, the rulers of some powerful countries will use force to conquer neighboring countries and make them their vassal states, forming a geopolitical “strategic buffer zone.” Secondly, if the states within an empire obey the hierarchical order established by the suzerain state, a state of peaceful coexistence might be formed within an empire and a long period of peace could occur. Due to the strength of the suzerain state and the size of the entire imperial system, it is difficult for other states to pose a threat to the suzerain state and its imperial system, and thus easy to maintain a state of external peace.

In modern times, some imperial fanatics have used the theory of “living space” in geopolitics as a justification for expanding and conquering other countries’ territories. According to this theory, the state is an organic life form that has a process of growth and development, and it is only when it reaches a certain spatial value that the organism enters its safest and most dynamic stage. In short, building a strong empire, colonizing and expanding externally is necessary for the survival and development of the state, which needs to have enough “living space” in order to keep itself in a safe and prosperous state. This theory of “living space” has become an important reason why some Western powers walked on the path of empire, the most notorious among them the “Third German Reich” established by Hitler.

In the real world, we cannot rule out the possibility that the rulers of some countries do carry out military conquest and imperial rule over surrounding countries for the sake of the security of their domestic regimes. But even so, they would not openly claim that the reason for their foreign expansion is to maintain their own regime, which is tantamount to nakedly admitting that the security of their own regime is based on the occupation and domination of other countries’ territories. This open robber logic was not even used by the Japanese invaders of China in the 1930s and 40s, and there was a grand reason for Japan’s war of aggression against China, namely, creating a so-called “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” In other words, basing the security of the domestic regime on the invasion of the surrounding countries is a typical manifestation of the law of the jungle, which has long been abandoned by the civilized world because it is neither in line with the most basic international law and morality, nor can it in any way bring long-lasting domestic peace and prosperity.

Fei Haiting: Is there an internal logic of evolution between nation-state, great power (strong state), or hegemonic state to empire? What causes a hegemonic state to evolve into an empire and what causes a great state to exercise self-restraint and not end up in the illusion of an empire?

Yu Keping: Your question can be thought of in another way: Is there an inherent political logic between states and empires? The state is the earliest form of public power for human beings. States preceded empires and, according to available archaeological findings, the first states and empires in human history both emerged in ancient Egypt. Around 3200 BC, Menes unified Upper and Lower Egypt and established the "First Dynasty," marking the formation of the ancient Egyptian state. In 2334 BC, the Akkadians established the first empire in human history, the Akkadian Empire. From the available archaeological evidence, the first empire in the history of mankind. In global political history, political logic is that the emergence of states inevitably leads to the emergence of empires.

As for the factors that prevent a powerful nation from becoming an empire, there are, by and large, both external and internal reasons. The external factor is whether the international community or other countries have enough power to resist and restrain the expansion of a powerful country. The internal factor consists mainly of two features: one is the profitability of foreign expansion and conquest, and the second is a democratic rule of law system at home. Historically, empires were always related to authoritarian power and if the domestic democratic forces were strong enough, then the external expansion of a state could be effectively stopped. Regarding genuine democracies, this does not only mean freedom and equality for the domestic population, but also necessarily requires equality among nationalities and between nations. Therefore, democracy and empire are intrinsically mutually exclusive, while autocracy and empire are intrinsically linked to each other. The collapse of the British Empire was to a large extent linked to its domestic democratic politics. The independence of India was not only the result of the struggle of the Indian people, but was also closely linked to the advocacy of many members of the British Parliament for the liberation of colonies. It is due to the unstoppable growth of democratic politics throughout the world after the Second World War that I dare to conclude that the era of empires is bound to be gone from world history! From the point of view of domestic politics, autocracy cannot dominate for a long time within any nation-state and as long as domestic politics takes the path of democratization, the policy of imperial aggression in foreign countries will certainly be abandoned; from the point of view of international politics, equality among nations and peace among human beings have become universal human values. Any great power that pursues imperialist aggression against other countries will certainly lose the moral support of humanity and thus be strongly opposed by the vast majority of countries in the world. Any great power, if it is isolated internationally and spurned by the righteous forces of all mankind, will surely end up in failure, even if it seems to be powerful.

Empires in History

Fei Haiting: There have been many empires in the history of world politics and they have played different roles in their respective historical periods. In your opinion, which of these cases are particularly worthy of attention and study?

Yu Keping: Historians often argue that the history of the world is also a history of empires. So far, in the history of civilizations, the main form of state rule for the vast majority of humanity has been empire. From science and technology, literature and art, ideology and theory, and religious beliefs, to capitals and castles, weapons and equipment, palaces and towers, roads and bridges, water conservation projects, infrastructure, etc., empires have all set new records. They have also caused deep disasters to human beings, from militarism, wars, conquering cities, and devastation, to autocracy, dictatorship, oppression, and racial discrimination. The sins of empires are too numerous to recount. Whether in glory or in disaster, empires are an indelible part of human historical memory. Moreover, most of the nation-states of today are born out of historical empires and these states, in tracing their own history, have always encountered other empires. Conversely, although historical empires have disintegrated or collapsed one after another, the descendants of these imperial legacies still exist among the nation-states of today, and their historical traditions and political legacies have profoundly shaped the political landscape of the modern world.

Over the long course of human political development, hundreds of empires, large and small, have emerged around the world, although not many have served as regional or world superpowers.

Historically, empires could also be divided into ancient and modern empires; land, sea and steppe empires; military and colonial empires; formal and informal empires, according to different typological criteria. Among the various empires in history, there are usually no more than 20 empires that have been studied by expert scholars as typical cases. In my opinion, the most influential and representative examples of empires in human history span 13 empires, including Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, Rome, Mongolia, Ottoman, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Russia, Great Britain, and the Qing Dynasty. They are typical representatives of various empires that have appeared in history. Theoretically, an in-depth analysis of the rise and fall of these empires and their ruling practices can suggest the general rules of empire creation and development, and the essential characteristics of imperial institutions.

Fei Haiting: You once mentioned that socio-political institutional arrangements have a more profound impact on the rise of empires than military power, technological level, and economic strength. In your opinion, what aspects of institutional construction can match or support the prosperity of a country?

Yu Keping: Many empire researchers have found that the factors affecting the rise and fall of empires are multifaceted, with the direct factor being military power first, followed by economic strength and technological edge. But behind these factors,

there is actually a more profound factor, which is the political institutional arrangement of a society. On the one hand, even if a country has strong economic power and advanced weaponry, if it does not have an advanced national defense system, a military service and military command system as well as a logistical support system, it will still not escape the fate of defeat. Regarding the empire of China's Northern Song Dynasty, regardless of its high level of economic development and comprehensive economic strength, or weaponry and troop size—even comparable to the Han and Tang empires in Chinese history, which were known for their economic prosperity and national strength, and were certainly greater than the neighboring countries at that time—in the end, the Song empire failed to defeat the Jin Dynasty, whose comprehensive economic strength was far inferior to it. The fundamental reason for its military failure lies in its political corruption and the major defects of its military defense system.

On the other hand, even if they occupy or conquer other countries for a while with their strong military power, such empires do not last if they do not have proper administrative and social management systems. Look, for example, at the cases of the Macedonian, the Mongol or the Napoleonic Empires. Although they once rose to prominence and were unrivaled in the world for quite some time, they were not able to establish an advanced elite selection and administrative system. So, with the death of their founders, all these empires fell apart and became short-lived empires. Take the Macedonian Empire example: Alexander the Great built a huge empire spanning Europe and Asia in a short period of time, and its military, economic and cultural power was dominant in Eurasia. According to the historical cycle of imperial decline, such a powerful empire would usually last for a fairly long period of time. However, Alexander's empire lasted only for 13 years, the shortest-lived great empire in history. The main reason for this is that a proven system for the succession of supreme power had not been established.

In addition, only when a country has an advanced system of elite selection, political decision-making, power distribution and control, production and exchange, trade and taxation, will that country produce a large number of outstanding political, scientific, and economic elites. And only then can it prevent the supreme power of the empire from being abused by mediocre people and at the same time prevent the highest decision-makers from making disastrous mistakes for the empire. The Assyrian, Persian, Ottoman, and Roman empires had not only advanced military systems, but also well-established provincial, governorship, religious, taxation, and distribution systems. The early Roman Empire's system of heads of state and the senate ensured that the supreme power of the empire was in the hands of highly qualified people and that their power was restrained to a certain extent.

The modern British Empire was the first in the world to establish a constitutional monarchy, a representative democracy, a modern rule of law system, and a modern political party system, which established the fundamental principles of sovereignty over the people and the rule of law in the form of a political system. The changes in

the political system further led to changes in the economy, trade, education and science, and technology systems. Britain became the first country in the world to establish a modern market economy and financial system. These major institutional changes greatly stimulated people's free thinking and creativity, and directly contributed to the initiation of the Industrial Revolution, which not only placed the British Empire far ahead of the world in science and technology, but also made Britain a pioneer of the world's industrial revolution and modernization. In short, these new social and political structures eventually facilitated the unstoppable rise of the British Empire.

The Fate of Empires and the Ideal Political System of Humanity

Fei Haiting: From the perspective of real-world politics, the dream of empire is still alive in the hearts of many people. Do you think that empires will be revived in world politics? Will new empires emerge again in human history?

Yu Keping: It is true that many people still harbor the dream of an empire. Not only among the political elites and the general public but even among intellectuals. There are many people who have crude fantasies about establishing an empire. But the conclusion of my own research on the historical fate of empires is very clear: imperialism will exist for a long time, but the historical fate of empires has come to an end.

First of all, the main tool for building empires has been abandoned by the mainstream of human civilization. As is the norm in history, all empires were founded primarily through military expansion and conquest, and war and violence were the concomitants of imperial existence. Needless to say, ancient empires were built on naked military conquest and violent repression. Even those modern empires that embrace the values of democracy and the rule of law must rely on violence as the ultimate support for their imperial rule. The glory of imperial rulers was built on the brutal and bloody repression and dispossession of other peoples and nationalities. For the ruling classes of the suzerain states—and especially for the authoritarian dictators of the empire—the mighty military violence of the empire was a symbol of its honor and power. But for the masses of colonial and dependent peoples and other ruled people, imperial violence and war meant enslavement and sacrifice. The founding of any powerful empire is full of blood-soaked stories. Even the establishment of so-called “civilized” overseas colonial empires such as Spain and Britain came at a great cost to the people of the occupied territories, let alone the empires of Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, and Mongolia, which were built purely on mass murder. With the progress of human civilization, military violence and warlike conquest of empires has completely lost its advanced and moral basis. The war machine, which used to showcase the glory of empires, has become a major tool of human self-flagellation and is now a disgrace to human civilization. The museums, massive military parades, and triumphal arches that the rulers of empires used to show off to their own people are now historical relics in the vast majority of countries

for the public and tourists to visit and browse. Not only that, the wars of aggression and military occupation by one country against another sovereign state have been expressly prohibited by the UN Charter, which was jointly concluded by all countries after the Second World War.

Secondly, the essence of empires has lost its moral basis. Inequality was intrinsic to the nature of empires and this intrinsic inequality was reflected in all aspects of race, color, religion, gender, culture, education, economy, and politics. Moreover, this inequality was legal and legitimate within the imperial system, and was an integral part of the imperial political order, relying on the political and legal system of the empire to guarantee it. The inequality between the suzerain state and the vassal state was all-encompassing, not only between states and peoples, but also in terms of individual rights; not only in terms of economic income and material living standards, but also in terms of political rights. This inequality among nations and peoples has completely lost its legitimacy in the contemporary world, no longer has a moral basis, and is fundamentally in violation of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

After the Second World War, the fundamental motives of imperial expansion began to disappear gradually in human history. On the one hand, thanks to the progress of science and technology, the development of productive forces, and the smooth flow of international trade, the powerful countries no longer need to acquire the wealth of other countries through the bloody means of war, but could rely entirely on advanced science and technology, and developed international trade to increase national wealth. On the other hand, the bitter lessons of the Second World War have led to the formation of a strong anti-war and war-averse public opinion within civilized countries, and external military wars of aggression are unpopular anywhere in the world, thus greatly increasing the cost of external wars. Even for the most powerful countries, the cost-benefit ratio of war often outweighs the benefits of rushing into foreign wars.

Fei Haiting: Due to the increasing sophistication and specialization of the tools of interstate interaction, it is possible for some countries to monopolize these tools and use them as blackmail to force other countries to accede to their unjust and unequal demands. Is there a possibility of some kind of “economic empire,” “cultural empire,” “technological empire,” or even “algorithmic empire?”

Yu Keping: Yes, as long as there is a political community like the state in human society, there exist tensions and conflicts between the national interests of the state and the general interests of humanity. Regardless of the system, generally speaking, the ruler of the state will always use all means to promote and defend the interests of his country. If in traditional times military conquest and political domination were the main means, in modern times economic and technological tools are more likely to be used. In the modern international order, there are bound to be countries that use military, political, economic and technological means to deprive other countries of their interests, or even to dominate the region and the world. Therefore, I conclude

that from the perspective of world history, the era of empires is gone, but imperialism will still exist for a long time.

By pursuing imperialist policies and exercising political, economic, military and technological control over other countries, many realistic national benefits can be brought to the powerful countries. When the powerful state resides in a dominant position over other countries, it can establish military bases in the dominated country, eliminate trade barriers, and obtain various political and economic priority rights and interests, thus substantially increasing the security, economic, transportation, trade, and cultural interests of the powerful state. In the era of globalization, if the cost of waging imperial wars of aggression by powerful countries is often more than worth the loss, the political and economic policy of pursuing imperialism always has more to gain and less to lose. For such reasons, imperialism will persist as a political ideology and realpolitik even as humanity has entered the era of globalization and networking. But the “economic empire,” “cultural empire,” “technological empire,” “algorithmic empire,” etc. are not political science concepts of empire.

Fei Haiting: Some scholars have pointed out that after centuries of imperial history, many of the old empires have entered a sort of “post-imperial era.” They need to reflect on their position and adjust their relations with extra-regional powers and small and medium-sized neighboring countries. In your opinion, in what ways will these historical empires reshape their role in the region or even in the world?

Yu Keping: The imperial system has continued in world history for thousands of years and has developed a strong inertia and a political legacy that is difficult to break away from. Whether originally a suzerain state, a vassal state or a colony, all states inevitably carry some traces of imperial tradition. For the former suzerain states, there are always people who stick to the old imperial dreams and attempt to re-establish the traditional imperial order. For the former vassal states or colonies, there are often two opposite political mindsets: one is a national revenge mentality, still full of hatred and hostility toward the former imperial rulers or colonizers, and never forgetting national revenge. The other one is a latent dependency mentality, where there still consciously or subconsciously exists a sense of political, economic and cultural affiliation with the former suzerain state or colonizer. Some people call this the “post-colonial mentality.” All these phenomena are part of what is called a “post-imperialist mentality.” In the so-called “post-imperialist era,” there are two typical ways for the successors of the former imperial rulers to reshape the present world order.

The first way is the imperialist or hegemonic approach. Closely related to state power and the structure of global order, empires will no longer have a realistic basis in the evolution of human civilization. Rulers and states that attempt to conquer, occupy, and dominate other countries and peoples continue to exist, and there will always be experts and scholars who will advocate and argue for the rationality and necessity of the imperial system. Therefore, I have repeatedly pointed out that

although the era of empire is gone, imperialism as a trend of thought, as a policy and strategy, will persist. Today, when empires have receded from the stage of history, there are three main reasons why many powerful countries continue to pursue imperialist policies and aspirations. First, national superiority. As a rule, powerful countries were historical empires and the glory of the imperial era has become the political tradition of these countries. This mindset is deeply engraved in the memories of the political elites and the general public, thus carrying an inherent sense of national superiority. Imperialism can satisfy this sense of superiority to a considerable extent. Second, the will to power. The will to power is essentially a desire for possession and when the supreme ruler of a powerful state is unfortunately an autocratic dictator and there is no corresponding system to effectively control his power, pursuing an imperialist policy of foreign expansion will often become a natural choice because the dictator's desire for possession knows no bounds. All national interests, including people's lives and property, belong to him. Some dictators, in order to satisfy their lust for power, even dare to risk the lives of their own people and launch imperialist wars of aggression on other countries. Third, practical interests. As mentioned earlier, political, economic and military control over other countries by means of imperialist policies can generate real national benefits to powerful countries.

The second way is the pacifist and global governance approach. Peace is the eternal value of humankind and only peace can provide a safe and secure guarantee for the security, prosperity and happy life of humankind. Humankind has made much effort to achieve peace and the imperial system has been used by many as a power structure for doing so. Objectively speaking, some great empires, such as the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the British Empire, did bring lasting peace to the regions they ruled. However, empires cannot be built, expanded and maintained without war. It is a basic historical lesson that imperialism means war. Thus, after the Second World War, the inter-imperial global order was irreversibly replaced by a global order among sovereign states. This replacement was a great historic advance. However, after the collapse of the imperial system, humankind has not eradicated war, though there have not since been any global-scale wars. The era of globalization posed new challenges to the nation-state system, particularly the challenge of a global security order. Both the logic of historical evolution and the logic of imperial domination tell us that a return to the imperial system cannot be the right way to resolve human security challenges in the era of globalization. The right way should be to follow the internal logic of the globalization process and actively explore a global order based on the community of human destiny and global governance.

Fei Haiting: You argued that returning to the imperial system cannot be the right way to resolve human security challenges in the era of globalization. However, judging from the actual consequences of the Covid-19 epidemic and the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, the globalization process seems to face a reversal. How do you conceive of the latest challenges facing this process? What kind of ideal political

form do you think human society should pursue when facing the reality of the current globalization process?

Yu Keping: The recent epidemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict are the biggest crises encountered by humankind after entering the era of globalization, and the biggest challenges to the present global order. Faced with such a major human disaster, the entirety of humanity, especially governments, should cooperate in close unity to deal with the overall crisis. However, unfortunately, we encounter a sad phenomenon: some big powers are reluctant to cooperate on an international scale, lack the necessary mutual trust, and are willing to fight with each other and there is even the serious threat of a nuclear war. Extreme nationalism is prevalent and serious xenophobic sentiments have emerged in some countries. Some big countries are resistant to international organizations and international cooperation, and national protectionism is on the rise. Many people are beginning to question the process of globalization, and anti-globalization and de-globalization are gaining momentum. Some people are becoming skeptical of the process of human political progress characterized by democracy and decentralization, and statism is on the rise again. As an idealist, I firmly reject not only the illusion of empire, but also the irreversibility of the globalization process.

Although the worldwide impact of the Covid-19 epidemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict have caused ups and downs and reversals in the process of globalization, they ultimately cannot terminate this process or change its direction. We should realize that globalization is indeed a double-edged sword for nation-states, which may become winners if they respond properly, or losers if they do not. However, from the perspective of the long-term development of all humankind, the process of globalization is fundamentally beneficial to the general interests of the entirety of humankind and is therefore an unstoppable process of human civilization. Blocking the process of globalization, even if it may be beneficial in the short term, will definitely harm fundamental interests in the long term. Globalization has linked the destinies of all nation-states as never before and only through global governance can we effectively solve the many global problems facing humanity, and establish a just and reasonable global order.

I continue to believe that advocating for a democratic, just, transparent, equitable, and win-win global governance is the key to solving pressing global problems and tackling serious global challenges. We should embrace an ideal of global governance and this ideal is to achieve global good governance. Global good governance is the maximization of the public interest of all actors in the world, and the maximization of the common interest of the international community. Global good governance is the best state of affairs for the international order and it is the best mode of cooperation both among governments and among global civil society. Just as good governance is an ideal state for national governance, global good governance is an ideal state for world governance and is where the moral strength of the international community lies. Global good governance sets a long-term goal for the governance

of all mankind and can give world governance a clear direction of development. The Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the climate catastrophe experienced by all humankind prove once again that in the era of globalization, national interests are closely related to global common interests and that close cooperation within the international community and mutual trust among human beings are indispensable. Trust and cooperation are the cornerstones of global good governance. Once global natural and humanitarian disasters occur, there is often no way to talk about isolated national interests. Therefore, the pursuit of global good governance is not only the pursuit of the common interests of all humankind, but also, in a sense, the pursuit of the public interests of nation-states.

[The text was slightly shortened by Thomas Heberer]

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